The Central Asia-Caucasus ANALYST

A Publication of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center

November 18, 2026

The Great Standoff: Kandahar, Kabul, and the Rights of Afghan Women

S, Frederick Starr, Chairman, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute,

American Foreign Policy Council

Even though China, Russia, and many other countries engage actively with projects in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, the government in Kabul still suffers gravely from the lack of formal recognition, beginning with the United Nations. Many countries accord charges d'affaires from Kabul most of the privileges of ambassadorships. Yet the fact that major international financial institutions withhold recognition severely limits the Taliban government and could even threaten its rule.



The chief cause of this international standoff are accusations of terrorism and the Taliban's laws that restrict women's lives, limit their access to education, and ban them from the labor force. Charges of Afghan terrorism now arise mainly from its neighbors Pakistan and Tajikistan. But the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan remains at the top of the international agenda. At an international conference in Uzbekistan in 2024 the foreign ministers of several dozen countries, including China and Russia, all declared that they would not consider recognition until Kabul lifted its constraints on women. Putin subsequently reneged on Foreign Minister Lavrov's position, but Russia remains a rare exception.

What accounts for Kabul's stubbornness on the key issue of women's rights? Afghanistan's

© 2026 Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center
American Foreign Policy Council / Institute for Security & Development Policy
509 C St NE, Washington, DC 20002 / V. Finnbodavägen 2, 13130 Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden
www.silkroadstudies.org

new rulers know that they are under mounting domestic pressure to bring the country into the modern world. They also realize that deals with foreign investors will increase contact with the modern world with all its complexities. A number of top Taliban themselves, having lived in the Gulf states while negotiating with Washington, observed there the expansion of women's education and the erosion of Muslim guardianship laws, and could see the link between such policies and economic growth. Yet Afghanistan remains intransigent.

Dyring the Karzai/Ghani eras most Afghans in the more developed North welcomed the spread of education for women. Many northern women entered the professions and started businesses of their own. Thus, a woman prominent in the Kabul Chamber of Commerce ran a cement firm. However, this was not the case in the impoverished and backward South, and it was there, especially in the hardscrabble provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, that the Taliban arose and remains deeply entrenched today.

The capital of the Afghan South is Kandahar and it is there that Mullah Omar founded the Taliban in 1994 and controlled it down to his death in 2013. Barely educated and untraveled, Omar doggedly resisted both Russian and American pressures. Due to Omar's intransigence Afghanistan refused to turn over Osama bin Laden to the U.S.

The South –mainly Kandahar and Helmand provinces—is Afghanistan's poorest region, barely surviving from agricultural produce and local trade. Kandahar is the country's second largest city but in every index of modernity it lags far behind Kabul, as well as Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif, the third and fourth cities. This is the home of the tribal Pashtun people, who comprise about 45% of the Afghan population and who, over several centuries, claimed the Afghan crown.

With the country's economic life centered in Kabul, Kandahar had to accept Kabul as the capital. And with nearly four-fifths of Afghans speaking Tajik (Dari) versus less than half who spoke Pashto, Kandahar had to yield on language as well. These concessions remain in effect today.

When Afghanistan fell under U.S. control Washington favored the Tajiks. This seemed logical at the time, as Tajiks from the Panshir were the last Afghan forces still fighting the Taliban. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell warned the Tajiks not to take Kabul but they did so anyway, and Washington then averted its eyes when the Tajiks adopted a "winner takes all" policy, filling the ministries with northerners. True, both Karzai and Ghani were Pashtuns, but this mattered little.

© 2026 Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center

Power lay with the Northerners. Pashtuns in Kandahar nursed their wounded pride and vowed revenge.

Their day arrived when U.S. forces abruptly departed Afghanistan. The Taliban's thirty-five member governing Council presented itself as the country's liberators and voted Sheikh Habitullah Akhundzadah as their supreme leader, the "Leader of the Faithful." His right to this title had been endorsed by none other than Ayman al Zawahiri, leader of al Quaeda. In naming him, the Council appropriated for Sunni Afghanistan the exceptional powers accorded to Ayatollah Khomeini in Shiite Iran.

Akhundzadah, the son of the imam of an impoverished Pashtun village, had only a high school education. He had spent years in the ideological hotbed of Quetta, Pakistan, and then served as a judge on courts of Sharia law. Uncommunicative by nature, Akhundzadah promptly erected a curtain of silence around himself that proved all but impenetrable to diplomats and journalists. This second successor to Mullah Omar (the first was murdered), immediately began issuing instructions to the civil government in Kabul. Lacking competence and credibility on economic matters, Akhundzadah focused his pronouncements on the status of women.

No one in Kabul publicly challenged his right to do so. For more than a year the leadership there focused instead on imposing civic order, appointing ministers and key staff at every level, and learning the rudiments of the ministries they controlled. With the Taliban running the government rather than shooting at it, civic life returned. The new ministers learned how to manage the lengthening parade of visitors. They lent an ear to many proposals for investments and collaborations, and enthusiastically signed on to more than a few of them.

But the euphoria did not last. Six million emigrants were returning from Pakistan and Iran, with neither food nor shelter. Old tensions with Islamabad over the terrorist activities of Pakistani Taliban along the Afghan border led to bombings in Kabul. Though restricted, the Internet brought news of thriving life abroad that invited bitter comparisons with Afghanistan's continuing poverty. Taliban leaders in Kabul were thrown on the defensive and had to respond.

Their first move was to publicize the many visitors from abroad as evidence of the new rulers' acceptance worldwide. Then they focused on a few flagship projects, among them the 285 kilometer long Qosh Tepa canal to bring water from the Amu Darya (Oxus) to irrigate barren Afghan regions. Though this initiative has aroused deep concerns among

© 2026 Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center

Afghanistan's neighbors, Taliban leaders in Kabul were convinced that by charging ahead on a few flagship initiatives they could earn the public's patience and acceptance.

But this gambit is not working. The conflict with Pakistan has suspended crucial transport projects with Islamabad, while war in Iran has closed that door to the outer world. Kabul's northern neighbors Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan may each contemplate $1.5 billion annual trade with Afghanistan but their more urgent concern is with East-West transport and trade. And while Afghanistan is clearly of interest to Moscow and Beijing, their more urgent priorities lie elsewhere.

This is the point at which the issue of women's rights has become acute. On the one hand, many practical men in the ministries realize that by releasing the energies of millions of women and girls, the economy as a whole will receive a powerful and much needed jolt. Best of all, the cost of such a jolt would be negligible. On the other hand, Akhundzadah has convinced himself that he dealt decisively with women's rights when he laid down his initial decrees restating conservative Islam's age-old principles on the subject. His presentation of those principles was positive and even expansive. But in so doing, he also made clear that any deviation from them would be akin to apostacy. Worse, to change Akhundzadah's edicts on women would require an about face by the Dar al-Ifta, the religious judiciary, which the Supreme Leader himself had created.

Optimists may dream of a bold volte face by Akhundzadah, which his hand-picked Dar al-Ifta would then endorse. Such a carefully worded reversal would solve the most vexing problem facing Taliban structures in Kabul. Even if the resulting reforms are limited, large sections of the northern public would welcome them, as might possibly the Pashtun South as well. Abroad they would be received as a break in the dam and the first step along what many would consider an unavoidable path.

But is such a shift in Kandahar even vaguely possible, let alone likely? The Leader of the Faithful is known to be intensely inward and secretive by nature, a man who avoids publicity at all cost. His present rulings enable him to maintain that posture, unchallenged. However, a change of direction, if only a modest revision of the prevailing Koran-based laws on women, would draw unwanted attention to Kandahar and to his person. Akhundzadah knows full well that in July 2025 the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest. Nothing he can do will nullify this. His best course is therefore to lie low and allow the Sharia court system to do its work on the basis of existing law. Change to his one signature policy is not in the cards.

© 2026 Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center

If this is the case, what are the Afghanistan's real prospects? However practical and relatively modern the outlook of some ministers in Kabul, they are strictly bound by the decisions of the Leader of the Faithful as interpreted by the Sharia courts. And both of these are solidly rooted in the political culture of the undeveloped and backward South, i.e., the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabulk, Pactria, and Ghazni. Until the gap between that region and the Tajik and Uzbek North is reduced, no real change in the South's outlook is to be expected.

Several megaprojects under active consideration in Kabul and among entrepreneurs abroad could have precisely this effect. The TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India) gas pipeline from Turkmenistan will cross Afghanistan's southern poverty belt and then enter Pakistan at Spin Boldak. Provinces crossed by the pipeline will be paid in gas, which can be converted into much needed fertilizer for the South's agriculture. Railroad lines running south from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will reduce the cost of getting agricultural products from Afghanistan's impoverished South to markets. These and other projects, including initiatives to modernize the South's barely existent telecommunications system, are all under active considerations.

As they consider future US strategy for Afghanistan, Washington policymakers must bear in mind the contradictory forces in play there. On the one hand is the formidable and deeply institutionalized resistance to change regarding Afghan women, especially in Afghanistan's southern provinces. On the other hand are a series of international initiatives which, if successfully implemented, could ameliorate the prevailing poverty in the Afghan South and integrate this benighted region with the rest of the country.

Indeed, it was the United States which, beginning in 1946, supported the construction of the South's important Kajaki Dam as a step towards freeing that region from abject poverty and malignant ignorance. A return to this focus will undercut the causes that for a century have enabled often ignorant males from Kandahar and neighboring provinces to dictate policies to their fellow citizens in the central and northern zones.

Since the disastrous US withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2020 Washington has adopted a "hands off' strategy, providing limited humanitarian assistance but not participating in the discussion of a growing number of strategic development projects. Some of these projects are fanciful, others will be owned or dominated by China, Russia, or other external investors. For the US, the choice is not between these initiatives and inaction,

© 2026 Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center

though some may prove attractive to American investors. Rather, it is between inaction and a focused engagement with specific projects that have the potential to develop the South and dissolve the psychology that now underlies Kabul's negative policies towards women and other equally benighted stances. Of course, such engagement should be conditioned on reciprocal steps from the Afghan side.

This is the choice that should be the focus of Washington's attention, rather than considering only the binary choice between inaction and championing fundamental changes that most thoughtful observers consider highly unlikely.



© 2026 Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center